



## First record of European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* in Madagascar

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Le première observation de *Merops apiaster* à Madagascar—un petit groupe à Ifaty, sur la côte sud-ouest, le 29 novembre 1996—est documentée. En vue de la route migratoire de l'espèce, sa présence dans le pays n'est pas surprenante.

**B**etween 28 November–1 December 1996, I stayed at the Mora Mora Hotel, in Ifaty, north of Tuléar in south-west coastal Madagascar. From an ornithological perspective, this area is famous for its 'Spiny-desert' endemic species such as Long-tailed Ground Roller *Uratelornis chimaera* and Subdesert Mesite *Monias benschi*. During my stay in this area the winds were relatively strong (25–40kph) and predominantly from a north-westerly direction.

On the evening of 29 November, I was birding a relatively large area, 3–4 km north of the Mora Mora Hotel, which had recently been cleared of vegetation. I was primarily searching for Banded Kestrel *Falco zoniventris* which had been noted in this area on several occasions during the preceding weeks. As I scanned across the trees and vegetation that remained, I noted a number of Madagascar Bee-eater *Merops superciliosus* both perched and feeding in the area. Continuing, principally searching for birds perched in prominent positions, I noticed a small group of European Bee-eater *M. apiaster* perched at a range of 75–100 m, and observed them with my wife, Cerian, through a 30x telescope. All of the birds were worn adults. At this point, four Madagascar Bee-eater joined the group, permitting a direct comparison of the two species. The European Bee-eaters remained in the area for at least an hour. Later the same evening, I again saw four European Bee-eaters, c1 km to the south; these birds may have been part of the same group.

That evening, I mentioned the sighting to a number of birders in the area, but the following day the birds were not seen. It was only during evening discussions at the Mora Mora Hotel that I noticed that Langrand<sup>2</sup> did not list European Bee-eater as having been recorded in Madagascar.

### Description

European Bee-eater is a species with which I am very familiar and, indeed, I had seen them on many occa-

sions during the preceding six weeks in southern Africa. They were immediately recognisable and separable from Madagascar Bee-eater by their turquoise-blue upper chest and belly, and the chestnut cap, nape and mantle. In addition, the birds exhibited a full yellow throat from the base of the bill to the thin black line separating the throat from the turquoise-blue breast. The central tail feather projection was far shorter than the Madagascar Bee-eaters present in the same area. In flight, the golden-yellow scapulars and rump were prominent, although the colours were somewhat faded.

Madagascar Bee-eater is more reminiscent of Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *M. persicus*, being predominantly green with a rufous throat, and are thus not really confusable.

### Distribution

European Bee-eater is a common summer visitor to North Africa, and southern Europe east to Central Asia. It winters predominantly in southern and eastern Africa from Kenya south to Transvaal, although small numbers winter in West Africa. Fry *et al*<sup>1</sup> provide full details of its status and distribution. It is a common migrant through the Arabian Gulf in spring and autumn and it seems unsurprising to me that a small group should find itself in south-west Madagascar during its 8,000 km migration between the breeding and wintering grounds, particularly taking into account the relatively strong onshore winds at this time. ♀

### References

1. Fry, C.H., Fry, K. and Harris A. 1992. *Kingfishers, Bee-eaters & Rollers*. London, UK: Christopher Helm.
2. Langrand, O. 1990. *Guide to the Birds of Madagascar*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

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